

Techniques to Optimizing GC Analysis of Ethylene Glycol in Water

The analysis of ethylene glycol in water is a very common test in environmental laboratories. Many of these samples originate from water runoff at airports where ethylene glycol is used as a de-icing agent for airplanes during winter months. Because ethylene glycol is highly soluble in water, it is not easily concentrated by purge and trap. Therefore, the most frequently used sample introduction technique is direct aqueous injection. The direct aqueous injection of ethylene glycol can be challenging because, if not done properly, it can be difficult to attain reproducibility and good peak shape. The large expansion volume of water can cause backflash, carryover can cause inconsistent results, and excess water can extinguish the FID flame. These problems can prevent achieving the detection limit for ethylene glycol, which may vary in the 1-10ppm range.

Poor Peak Shape

With a column head pressure of 10psig and an injection port temperature of 250°C, a 1µL injection of water will expand to 1420µL of vapor. This large vapor cloud exceeds the volume of most inlet liners, causing backflash. If backflash occurs, the vapor cloud can expand out of the liner and injection port and result in poor sample transfer onto the column. Also, the glycol compounds are not focused in a narrow band but, instead, are focused in the condensed water that beads onto the column walls, so the compounds of interest can elute as split peaks. This peak splitting effect is most apparent when performing a splitless injection because of the solvent focusing required. Split peaks and backflash compromise the analysis by causing irreproducible peak shapes.

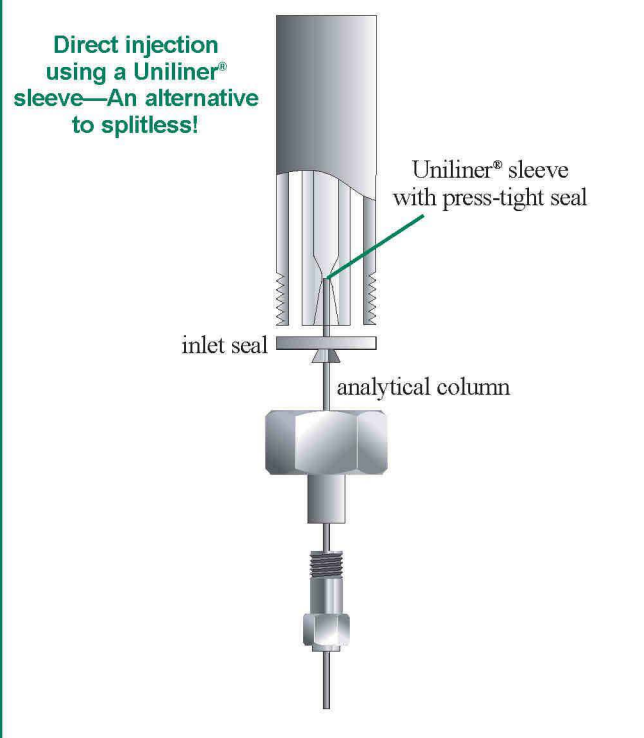
One technique to reduce the effect of vapor expansion and poor solvent focusing is the use of a Uniliner® injection port sleeve. This sleeve forms a leak-free connection with the column end (**Figure 1**), thereby ensuring a complete sample transfer. Additionally, the Uniliner® sleeve requires operation at a higher pressure than traditional splitless liners, which forces the large vapor cloud to be focused into a narrow band when entering the column. This minimizes sample backflash and eliminates the need for solvent focusing. By using a Uniliner® sleeve, the aqueous ethylene glycol sample is completely vaporized and properly transferred to the column in a focused, narrow band, thereby achieving reproducible peak areas. Uniliner® sleeves are available for conversion of packed column injection systems and for split/splitless injection systems.

Sample Residue Carryover

Carryover is another problem associated with ethylene glycol analysis. When analyzing glycols, carryover can be caused by sample residue in the syringe being carried over from one injection to another. If the syringe is not properly cleaned between analyses, carryover will cause inconsistent results.

Figure 1

The Uniliner® sleeve forms a leak-free connection, minimizes backflash, and helps focus the sample.



Rinsing the syringe with either water or water/methanol (50:50) three to six times between each injection will eliminate sample residue and minimize the possibility of carryover.

FID Flameout

Column stationary phase choice is a critical consideration when analyzing glycols in water via direct injection. Water analyzed on a non-polar stationary phase, such as the Rtx®-1 column, or on a moderately polar stationary phase, such as the Rtx®-200 column, will cause the flame on the FID to be extinguished. This is because the water will not partition properly and will “bead up” on the phase, producing a large plug of water that passes through the detector and extinguishes the flame. The more commonly-used GCs will experience flameout under these circumstances while others will not.

To minimize the possibility of extinguishing the flame, select a polar stationary phase that is more compatible with water. The Stabilwax® stationary phase is one of the more polar phases, making it a good choice for water injections. It allows water to partition properly, which prevents it from beading up on the stationary phase and quenching the FID flame.